BLAISE PASCAL

PLAN OF THE THOUGHTS.

ACCOUNT OF A CONVERSATION IN WHICH PASCAL EXPOSED THE PLAN AND MATTER OF HIS WORK ON RELIGION.[1]

[The following passage is an extract from the preface of the first edition of the *Thoughts*. It was written by Étienne Périer, and is of great importance, since it makes known how Pascal had conceived the plan of that defence of Christianity, of which the *Thoughts* are but scattered and incomplete fragments. "It is," to use the expression of M. Sainte-Beuve, "a *luminous abridgment*," that helps us penetrate the *Thoughts* more profoundly. See PORT-ROYAL, l. iii., c. xxi., p. 336 *et seq.*, entitled: *Conversation de Pascal.—Son plan ressaisi.—Préambule et méthode.—Opposée à celle de Descartes.—Entrée en matière.—L'homme devant la nature.—L'homme en lui-même.—Le moi.—L'homme dans la société.—Où est le droit naturel?—Des opinions populaires.—Incertitude universelle.—Angoisse.—2° L'homme en quête du salut.—Les philosophies.—Les religions.—La religion.—Le peuple juif et l'Ecriture.—Les miracles et les prophéties.—Jésus-Christ.*]

THERE happened an occasion, ten or twelve years ago, when Pascal was pressed, not to write what he had in his mind on this subject (religion), but to give some account of it *viva voce* He did it, therefore, in presence and at the instance of several very eminent persons who were his friends. He developed to them in few words the plan of his whole work; he represented

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[1] This conversation must have taken place about 1658. Who were those friends before whom Pascal explained himself? What was the place of the conversation? The too discreet prefaces have taken good care not to tell us; but certainly the *élite* of Port-Royal were there, and the place of meeting was perhaps no other than Port-Royal of Paris. (Sainte-Beuve.)

to them what was to form its subject and matter; he gave them a *résumé* of its arguments and principles, and explained to them the order and sequence of things which he intended to treat of therein. And these persons, who were most capable of judging of such things, declare that they have never heard any thing finer, stronger, more touching, or more convincing; that they were charmed with them, and that what they saw of this project and this design in a discourse of two or three hours, delivered without premeditation or preparation, enabled them to judge what this work might at length become, if it were ever executed and perfected by a person whose ability and capacity they knew; who had been accustomed to bestow so much labor on all his works, that he scarcely ever was contented with his first thoughts, however good they might appear to others, and who has often rewritten, eight or ten times, pieces that any other than he would find admirable at first.

After having shown them what proofs make the greatest impression on the minds of men, and are best adapted to persuade them, he undertook to show that the Christian religion had as many marks of certainty and evidence as things that are received in the world as most indubitable.

In order to enter upon this design, he began by a delineation of man, in which he forgot nothing that could make him known both within and without himself, even to the most secret movements of his heart. He then supposed a man who, having always lived in general ignorance, and with indifference in regard to all things, especially in regard to himself, comes at length to consider himself in this picture and to examine what he is. He is surprised to discover therein an infinity of things on which he has never thought, and he could not notice without astonishment and wonder all that Pascal makes him feel of his greatness and his vileness, of his advantages and his weaknesses, of the little light that remains to him, and the darkness that surrounds him on almost every side, and, in fine, of all the astonishing contrarieties that are found in his nature. He can no longer remain in indifference, however feeble may be his reason, and however insensible he may have been hith-

erto, he must wish, after having thus known what he is, to know also whence he comes and what he must become.

M. Pascal, having thus awakened in him the disposition to inform himself in regard to a doubt so important, first directs him to the philosophers; and after having unfolded to him all that the greatest philosophers of all the sects have said on the subject of man, he makes him observe so many defects, so many weaknesses, so many contradictions, and so many falsehoods in all that they have advanced, that it is not difficult for this man to judge that it is not among the philosophers that he must find what he seeks.

He then carries him over the whole universe and through all ages, in order to point out to him an infinity of religions that are met with; but he shows him at the same time by reasons so strong and convincing that all these religions are only full of vanity, follies, errors, aberrations, and extravagances, that in them again he finds nothing that can satisfy him.

In fine, he directs his attention to the Jewish people, and points out in connection with them circumstances so extraordinary, that he easily engages his attention. After having represented to him all that is singular in this people, he especially directs his attention to a single book by which this people is governed, and which comprises at once its history, its law, and its religion. Scarcely has he opened this book when he learns that the world is the work of a God, and that this same God has created man in his own image, and endowed him with all the powers of body and mind that are adapted to this state of being. Although he has nothing yet that convinces him of this truth, it does not fail to please him; and reason alone suffices to discover to him more probability in the supposition that a God is the author of men and all that is in the universe, than in all that these same men have imagined by their own knowledge. What arrests his attention at this point is to perceive, by the delineation of man that has been given him, that he is very far from possessing all those advantages that he must have had when he left the hands of his Maker. But he does not remain long in this doubt; for, on

reading further in this same book, he finds that after man had been created by God in a state of innocence and with all sorts of perfections, his first act was to revolt against his Creator, and to employ all the powers that he had received in offending him.

M. Pascal then made him comprehend that this crime being he greatest of all crimes in all its circumstances, it had been punished not only in this first man who, having fallen thereby from his state, sank at once into misery, weakness, error, and blindness, but also in all his descendants, to whom this same man has communicated and will still communicate his corruption in the whole course of time.

He shows him in course different passages of this book, wherein he has discovered this truth. He warns him that man is no longer spoken of in this book but in relation to this state of weakness and disorder; that it is often said therein that all flesh is corrupt, that men are abandoned to their senses, and that they are prone to evil from their birth. He shows him again that this first fall is the source not only of all that is most incomprehensible in the nature of man, but also of a multitude of effects that are external to him, and of which the cause is unknown to him. In fine, he represents to him man so well delineated in the whole of this book, that he no longer appears to him different from the first image of him that he has traced.

It is not enough to have made known to this man his state full of misery; M. Pascal teaches him furthermore that he will find in this same book wherewith to console himself. And in fact, it causes him to observe that it is therein said that the remedy is in the hands of God; that we must have recourse to him for the strength that we lack; that he will have compassion and even send a deliverer to men, who will make satisfaction for them and repair their impotence.

After having explained a great number of very special remarks on the book of this people, he still makes him consider that it is the only book which has spoken worthily of the Supreme Being, and that has given the idea of a true

religion. He makes him conceive its most evident marks, which he applies to what this book has taught; and he particularly directs his attention to the fact, that it makes the essence of its worship consist in the love of God whom it adores: which is a character wholly peculiar to it, and conspicuously distinguishes it from all other religions, whose falsehood appears by the want of this essential mark.

Although M. Pascal, after having conducted so far this man whom he had proposed to persuade by insensible degrees, has not yet said any thing to him that might convince him of the truths which he has led him to discover, he has nevertheless put him in a disposition to receive them with pleasure, provided it could be shown him that he ought to yield to them, and even to desire with all his heart that they may be solid and well founded, since he finds in them advantages so great for his repose and for the enlightenment of his doubts. It is also the state in which every reasonable man ought to be, who has once fairly entered into the course of all those things that M. Pascal has just represented; and there is reason to believe that after this he would easily yield to all the proofs which he successively brought to confirm the certainty and evidence of all those important truths of which he had spoken, and which constitute the basis of the Christian religion, of whose truth it was his design to persuade.

In order to say something of these proofs in few words, after he had shown in general that the truths in question where contained in a book of whose certainty no man of good sense could doubt, he dwelt principally on the book of Moses, wherein these truths are peculiarly set forth; and showed by a great number of indubitable circumstances that it was equally impossible for Moses to have left a written account of false things, or for the people to whom he left them to have been deceived by them, even though Moses had been capable of being an impostor.

He also spoke of all the great miracles recorded in this book; and as they are of immense consequence for the religion therein taught, he proved that it was not possible

that they should not be true, not only by the authority of the book wherein they are contained, but also by all the circumstances that accompany them and render them indubitable.

He also showed in what manner the whole law of Moses was figurative; that all which had happened to the Jews was only the type of the truths accomplished at the coming of the Messiah; and that, the veil which covered these types having been removed, it was easy to see their complete accomplishment and perfect consummation in favor of those who have received Jesus Christ.

M. Pascal undertook in course to prove the truth of religion by the prophecies; and on this subject he dwelt much longer than on the others. As he had labored much on this subject, and had views in regard to it quite peculiar to himself, he explained them in a very intelligible manner; he showed their sense and sequence with marvellous felicity, and set them forth in all their brilliancy and power.

In fine, after having run through the books of the Old Testament, and having made several convincing observations to serve as foundations and proofs of the truth of religion, he undertook also to speak of the New Testament, and to draw his proofs of the truth itself from the Gospel.

He began with Jesus Christ; and although he had already invincibly proved his Messiahship by the prophecies and all the types of the law, whose perfect fulfilment was seen in him, he still adduced many proofs drawn from his person, from his miracles, from his doctrine, and the circumstances of his life.

He then dwelt upon the Apostles; and in order to show the truth of the faith which they proclaimed everywhere, after having established that they could not be accused of falsehood but upon the supposition that they were either deceivers or themselves deceived, he clearly showed that both of these suppositions were equally impossible.

In fine, he forgot nothing that could serve to establish th truth of the evangelical history, making very fine remarks on the Gospel itself, on the style of the Evangelists and their characters, on the Apostles in particular and their writings, on the

prodigious number of miracles, on the martyrs, on the saints—in a word, on all the ways whereby the Christian religion has been completely established. And although he had not the leisure, in a simple discourse, to treat at length of so vast a matter as he designed to do in his work, he nevertheless said enough to carry the conviction that all this could not be the work of men, and that God alone could have guided the issue of so many different effects, which all equally concurred in proving in an irresistible manner the religion that he himself came to establish among men.

Such in substance are the principal matters of which he undertook to speak in all this discourse, which he proposed to those who heard him only as an abridgment of the great work that he meditated; and it is by means of one of those who were then present, that the little I have just reported has been since known.

The author of the preface, after having given the history of the publication of the *Thoughts*, and explained some fragments that may seem obscure, adds: "It is still, it appears to me, quite proper, in order to undeceive some persons, that might, perhaps, expect to find here geometrical proofs and demonstrations of the existence of God, of the immortality of the soul, and of several other articles of Christian faith, to inform them that such was not the design of M. Pascal. He did not pretend to prove all these truths of religion by such demonstrations founded on evident principles, capable of convincing the obstinacy of the most hardened, nor by metaphysical arguments that often lead the mind more astray than they persuade it, nor by the common-places drawn from different effects of nature; but by moral proofs, which go to the heart rather than to the understanding; that is, he would labor more to touch and dispose the heart than to convince and persuade the mind, since he knew that the passions and the vicious attachments which corrupt the heart and the will are the greatest obstacles, and the principal hindrances we have to faith; and that, provided these obstacles could be removed, it was not difficult to make the mind receive the knowledge, and the reasons whereby it might be convinced.

"One will be easily persuaded of all this in reading these writings."